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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on how school practitioners respond to middle-school reform when it is approached from a research-based, theoretical framework. Using a goal-theory framework, a school-university collaboration at a middle school in a small midwestern town sought to move the school culture toward a task-oriented learning environment. Evaluation methods included onsite observation and interviews conducted with 11 coalition team members, which included the assistant principal, a parent and former student, and 9 teachers. Initial findings suggest that "getting kids interested in learning" was accepted as a guiding mission; however, teachers and the vice principal held competing beliefs that focused on fixing the students rather than the school. Obstacles to changing the deepest level of schooling included administrative constraints on teachers' time, teachers' varied viewpoints that contributed to a lack of focus, a technocratic mind set, and teachers' rejection of theoretical discussions. However, teachers did become more reflective and committed to examining principles for change. A conclusion is that because school change should be based on a rationale that relates to the nature of students and learning, goal theory may provide that guiding force. (Contains 42 references.) (LMI)

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Moving Toward a Task Focus in Middle Level Schools

by Jamie Sue Beck, Tim Urdan and Carol Midgley

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Moving Toward a Task Focus in Middle Level Schools

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Making The Transition To Middle Schools

> A volatile mismatch exists between the organization and curriculum of middle grade schools, and the intellectual, emotional, and interpersonal needs of young adolescents (Carnegie Council, 1989, p. 32).

In the past four years, educational policy makers and researchers have cited the Carnegie Council report as an endorsement for examining and reforming middle school education. The synthesis of research on middle-level schooling is comprehensive and its implications for practice are extensive. Currently, recommendations for "detracking" schools (Oakes & Lipton, 1992); dividing the school into smaller reference groups (Sizer, 1985; Alexander & McEwin, 1986); forming teachers and students into teams; assigning an adult advisor to each student (Alexander & McEwin, 1986; Van Hoose, 1991); and providing a common core of knowledge (e.g. Sizer, 1985) that enhances critical thinking, healthy living, and citizenship are advocated as appropriate measures for middle school reform (Carnegie Council, 1989). Within the larger school reform literature, researchers and policy makers also advocated a school-based management approach to making reforms, arguing that reform efforts should reflect a shared vision of student, teacher, and community empowerment (e.g., Conley, 1991; Carnegie Commission, 1986; Sizer, 1985; Levin, 1988; Comer, 1980).

In the past, advocates of middle school reform have focused in particular on special groups of students served inadequately by the system (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). Efforts to respond to the needs of underachieving, disadvantaged youth resulted in a proliferation of programs that aim at changing or remediating the student rather than the school environment. Life-related curriculum, special classrooms, "labs," and tutorials were often initiated (Nelson, 1988). In contrast to these efforts, studies of at-risk youth, and high school dropouts suggest that although disadvantaged students typically demonstrate academic failure, their lack of success and alienation with school is more related to how they perceive themselves than to their cognitive abilities (Mills, Durham, & Alpert, 1988; Rumberger, 1987; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986; Clark, 1983). More recent findings in the research on motivation also make clear that motivation and affect are important determinants of adolescent achievement related success.

As children develop cognitively, their perceptions of the nature of their academic ability change. Research by Nicholls (1984) shows that youth place increasing significance on peer approval and begin to understand the notion of "ability as capacity" as they make that transition

into adolescence. When children are young, they hold an optimistic view of their own abilities. They tend to believe that working hard means you are "smart" and that you can increase your ability with extra effort. However, as children reach early adolescence, their perceptions of ability change. Their feelings of self-worth and ability are established by how they do in comparison with others. They rely increasingly on information such as tracking, grades, and test scores for comparative measures (Paris, et al., 1991), and they begin to perceive that trying harder than their peers can indicate a lack of ability. As students become more focused on their performance relative to others, they typically avoid unfavorable comparisons and tasks that require more effort, and find ways to take short cuts, procrastinate or look for easy ways out (Covington, 1984).

In addition to the research on adolescent development, studies of early adolescents show that the transition from elementary school to middle school provides an occasion when the seeds of underachievement can be planted (Carnegie Council, 1989; California State Department of Education, 1987; Eccles & Midgley, 1989). According to these reports, even if children are demonstrating adequate academic achievement in elementary school, their achievement levels often drop during the middle school years. Although it is often assumed that this drop in performance is related to physiological and psychological changes associated with puberty, recent research points to deficiencies in the middle grades learning environment as a cause. Eccles, Midgley and their colleagues (1989) found that the middle grades learning environment is more ability-focused than the elementary school learning environment, suggesting that the middle school is structured to emphasize achievement goals based on relative ability rather than goals focused on learning for learning sake. Eccles and Midgley (1989) report that middle grade schools are more likely than elementary schools to separate students according to ability. Additionally, students in this study reported having fewer choices about what to study, were given less decision-making authority, and experienced less positive relationships with their teachers after the transition. As these researchers concluded, this move to a more ability-focused environment at a time when young adolescents are particularly vulnerable to its negative effects has profound implications for students motivation and achievement-related behavior.

The Theoretical Framework Guiding Our Collaboration

In this study, we focus on the research in motivation and, in particular, "goal theory." According to goal theory, the goals students pursue in an achievement setting have dramatic consequences for their approach to learning and level of engagement. When students are more

"ability-focused," they try to appear able relative to their peers and are concerned with demonstrating success even if that success requires little challenge. When students are more "task-focused," they express a desire to try hard, pursue challenging tasks, and persist in the face of failure (Elliott & Dweck, 1988; Maehr, 1989; Nicholls, 1984). Further research indicates that students with a "task-focused" goal orientation are also more likely to use learning strategies that reflect deeper processing and more metacognitive effort (Ames & Archer, 1988).

If, as this larger body of research seems to indicate, a task focus is so facilitative, why are some students more "task-focused" than others. In addition to the influence of parents and peers, we must consider the role that teachers and schools play in promoting a task-focus or ability-focus in students. As the research in goal theory indicates, the messages teachers and schools communicate regarding the tasks they assign, how they reward and recognize student learning, and how they structure the learning environment can also affect the students' motivation and learning goal orientation (Maehr & Midgley, 1991; Ames, in press; Maehr & Fyans, 1989).

In the recent work of Maehr and Midgley (1991), there is strong evidence that students who perceive the culture of their school as one that de-emphasizes social comparison and relative performance, and emphasizes the importance of learning, understanding, and problem solving are more likely to become intrinsically involved in their academic endeavors, in taking risks and in persisting in the face of difficulty. Thus, changing schools in a way that emphasizes the importance of problem solving and understanding rather than relative ability and comparative performance appears to have great potential.

Given these findings, we propose a different approach to school change, one that moves us away from a narrow focus on the innovations towards an approach that requires an examination of the "deepest level of schooling." This approach invites practitioners to examine the "psychological climate" of their school, to decide what it is they want to change, and then provides goal theory as an over-arching framework to guide the change process. To begin this process, we focus in particular on the dimensions of the learning environment identified in the work of Carole Ames and her colleagues.

We single out the intervention work of Carole Ames at the elementary level because it represents an important bridge between goal theory and practice and serves as a precursor to the efforts we have attempted at the middle school level. In her intervention study, Ames borrows the acronym TARGET from Epstein (1989), and identifies six classroom dimensions

in which she was able to elicit a more task-focused environment. Her model argues for an emphasis on the following: 1) Tasks that are inherently interesting; 2) Authority structures that allow for student autonomy and choice in negotiating academic tasks; 3) Recognition that reflects student effort and improvement; 4) Grouping that emphasizes student interest rather than relative ability; 5) Evaluations that are formative rather than normative; 6) Time that is used flexibly and creatively to encourage instruction that is more reflective of student developmental needs and interests. Based on these dimensions, we have used the TARGET acronym as a map to guide our own thinking and describe in the following pages how these dimensions could manifest themselves at a school-wide level.

Task- In a school environment that focuses on task mastery, school-wide policies and procedures would encourage exploratory learning, life-related curricula, and interdisciplinary teaching, and de-emphasize curriculum that is non-responsive to the particular characteristics, needs, and interests of its students, in particular those students at risk for failure. Similar to Dewey's notions of experiential learning (1938), a task-focused environment might "arouse curiosity, and strengthen initiative" (p. 38). At the classroom level, teachers can give students tasks that are relevant to their lives and require creative thinking and problem solving. However, teachers alone do not decide what students do in the classroom. School leaders in direct and subtle ways can impact the nature of the curriculum and instruction by the resources and attention they provide. Principals, school board members, and district superintendents can stress strict adherence to teacher-proof materials, district-mandated objectives, and instructional time, or they can encourage teachers to take risks and be creative in designing instructional tasks (Maehr, Midgley, & Urdan, 1992).

Authority- The degree to which teachers and schools involve their students in the decision-making process, allowing for personal autonomy, or giving students options has been directly related to positive motivation patterns in children. As Deci & Ryan (1985) argue, however, supporting student autonomy must go beyond giving students choices and allowing students to work on their own. Students must perceive that they have a degree of control over their own learning and quality of learning. The activities they engage in must be distinguished as meaningful and personally relevant. As Malone and Lepper (1987) describe, students who engage in tasks that offer personal challenge and give a sense of control over the process or product are more likely to demonstrate intrinsic purposes for their learning. In a task-focused environment, school-wide practices would enhance opportunities for student initiative and responsibility. Students who rarely have opportunities to control the selection of materials or

the pace of a project would have a better chance of engaging in these meaningful experiences if school policies allowed teachers flexibility in requirements for coverage and use of time.

Recognition and evaluation- How students are evaluated and recognized is another salient aspect of the school context that can affect student motivation (Ames & Archer, 1988). Because more traditional schools tend to be product oriented, assessment is often focused on correctness and form, absence of errors, and the comparison of products between peers. School-wide practices that encourage these sorts of assessments appear in the form of public honor rolls, honor society membership, and ability grouping. Elliot and Dweck (1988) have shown that this type of social comparison directly impacts students' willingness to take risks or pursue challenging tasks, while Ames and her colleagues (1988) have shown that social comparison directly affects students self-reports of ability as well as their efforts to use a repertoire of strategies for learning. A learning environment that places a lot of emphasis on grades and the public evaluation of others leads students to become more focused on their own ability and their place in the distribution of performers rather than on the mastery of a given task. This can be especially problematic for students who compare unfavorably when performance goals are emphasized.

Grouping- In a task-focused school, the curriculum would embrace different cultures and populations and would not promote programs that separate underachievers from the rest of the school population. As research indicates, tracking policies that sort students according to their ability enhance the possibility that adolescents in transition will make negative inferences about their own ability (Eccles & Midgley, 1989) and undermine the quality of learning opportunities teachers provide for adolescents in low-ability tracks (Oakes, 1985). The practice of homogeneously grouping students together according to their ability sends clear messages to parents, teachers, and students that the school is in the business of sorting who is able and who is not able. A task-focused school environment would encourage alternatives to grouping that focus on students' interests and learning goals and would examine a variety of instructional formats to support these groups, such as cooperative learning.

Time and Resources- The issue of time and its use also plays a key role in Ames' strategies for creating a task-focused elementary classroom (in press). At the middle school level, time flexibility may be even more crucial in establishing an environment that encourages risk-taking, learning, and problem-solving. The rigidity of a school day, segmented by 45-50 minute periods, reduces the likelihood that teachers will design long term projects or authentic learning activities that might conflict with the school's time management plan.

Expanding Carol Ames' classroom intervention model to examine school-wide policies and practices is proposed for a number of reasons. Rigid school level practices and policies can undermine the efforts of teachers to create a task-focused environment in their classrooms. Although there are isolated settings where teachers are able to create recognition and evaluation practices that reward effort rather than comparative ability, school-wide practices like ability grouping and posting honor rolls undermined those efforts. At the middle school level, the structure of the school day also points to the need for school-wide efforts. As students move from the elementary grades to the middle grades, they often see up to six or seven teachers daily. Thus, even if these students have a few teachers who are trying to create a task-focused classroom environment, when they attend other classes that are ability-focused, it is not likely that these students will develop a task-focused goal orientation.

The Study

Nature of Collaboration

In the fall of 1990, a collaborative relationship was formed between University researchers, school administrators, and teachers at a middle school in a small midwestern town. Initiated in an effort to examine and revise a wide range of policies and practices that would move the school culture toward a task-oriented learning environment, we asked the coalition team at East Middle School to decide what policies they wished to examine and offered to work with them within a goal-theory framework.

This study seeks to fill the void of research in school reform that is collaboratively based and theory driven. As part of a "true" school/university research collaboration in which the expertise of both the practitioners and the educational researchers would be tapped, we chose to study the school reform process using qualitative methods of collaborative inquiry.[1] In forming a coalition with East Middle School, we brought a theoretical framework for understanding student motivation, a broad conceptualization of the middle school movement, and a strong desire to see teachers and administrators examine how their school-wide policies and practices could create a culture focused on learning rather than relative ability. After reading the proposal that outlined our background and focus, the faculty at East Middle School

[1]Concurrent with our efforts to document the collaborative process, the larger project is documenting change through surveys measuring student and teacher motivations motivational and strategy use.

invited us to join them in forming a coalition for school improvement. This coalition would remain separate from the state mandated school improvement initiatives already underway at the school.

Data Sources

Our examination of the coalition process is based on a naturalistic/descriptive approach that interprets what is written, heard, and seen through our active participation in the coalition process, our observations of the school community, our interviews with key informants on the coalition team, and our review of documents produced during the process. As Allum recently suggested in his reflections on qualitative research (1991, p. 12), "We often forget that while a project's research design may call for specific and well-defined methods and procedures, the course of actual data collection is ultimately shaped by the relationships which evolve between the investigator and the subjects comprising the research site." In keeping with this image of the school/university collaboration, what follows in this paper is an in-depth examination of our first year of a three-year endeavor that acknowledges collaborative inquiry as a viable means of research.

During the first three months of our collaboration with East Middle School, we absorbed the local color, familiarized ourselves with the environment, and worked to build a rapport based on trust with members of the team. During daytime visits, the first author maintained field notes reflecting conversations shared with key informants. In the first four months, the eight members of the team from the University of Michigan also collected observations of school culture through their attendance at a variety of special and regularly scheduled events. These visits included monthly student "Fun nights," PTSO (Parent Teacher Student Organization) meetings, school board meetings, open houses, and staff meetings. More informal/chance conversations occurred during the school day in the teachers' lounge, the hallways, classrooms, in the principal's office, and on the annual sixth grade field trip to camp.

Throughout the year, we taped the weekly after-school coalition meetings and reviewed them to get a sense of the teachers' and administrators' implicit and explicit understanding of the school change process and its relationship to goal theory. We used the tapes to supplement notes that were taken while participating in the meetings. Later the tapes provided the analytic framework that led to our interview protocol. The interviews, which provide the bulk of the data in this paper, were designed from questions that emerged as we reviewed the various

sources of data. We generated hypotheses and questions based on this analysis and the interview protocol we developed as a result is the appendix.

In September and October of 1991, after several months of meetings and interactions, we scheduled semi-structured, intensive interviews with the 11 members of the coalition team. Interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes. We asked the members of the coalition to reflect on the school change process and the nature of a theory-driven collaborative effort. We designed our interview protocols to explicitly tap teachers' perceptions of the theoretical framework and the change process. Interested in the teachers' developing understanding of the theoretical framework we brought to the coalition process and its subsequent effect on the school change efforts, we examined our data looking for the same themes. Included in the interviews were the assistant principal, a parent and past student of the school system, and nine teachers (two special education teachers, the math department head, social studies department head, science department head, three sixth grade teachers, and the home economics teacher). As part of the in-depth interviews, we repeatedly asked our informants to discuss the various effects the changes they described would have on the students.

We also examined the documents produced at the school, usually by the assistant principal, looking for evidence of an understanding of our theoretical framework. Finally, we reflected on the actual changes in policies and practices we observed, remarking on how they reflect the coalition framework.

Results

In reflecting on the last fourteen months collaborating with East Middle School and in interpreting the wealth of information we collected, we describe here some preliminary discoveries that are particular to our efforts to move a middle school towards a task focus, and more generally to the process of bringing theory to practice. In this first section, we discuss early indicators that introducing a theory-driven approach to change would be met with competing theories. In the second section, we note that teachers, when explicitly asked, demonstrate reticence in articulating a guiding theoretical framework. In the third section, we discuss various "theories" teachers hold about adolescents that both complement and compete with goal-theory. Moving beyond discussions of teacher beliefs about adolescents, we discuss how teachers also articulated goals for school reform that compete with focusing on the "psychological climate" of the school. In spite of these competing "theories" and the teachers reticence in articulating the theoretical perspective, we describe in section four how aspects of

the goal-theory framework emerged in discussions of the school and classroom practices. In the fifth section, we discuss the change efforts that focused primarily on enabling mechanisms, such as scheduling, teaming, and small house organization and suggest that this focus also competes with our efforts to bring theory to practice.

I. Early Indicators of Competing "Theories"

In order for us to begin connecting the teachers' responses to school change, it is important that we set the context of our work, providing a sense of the "school's culture" when we arrived. For the purposes of this paper, we refer to "school culture" as the general motivational and achievement-related orientation that we discussed earlier.

East Middle School is located in Beauville[2], a small rural community in the Northwestern corner of Jones County. As a small town in the larger township of Van Heusen, Beauville's residents are largely white, working class people employed in various jobs related to the automotive industry. The recent plant closings and more general economic hardships associated with this industry has had its impacts on the residents of Beauville. One of the parents who occasionally attends our meetings and who is also a member of the school board has recently been laid off.

East Middle School is an old building. Built in the 1950's, it housed the original junior high school until the community built West Middle School in 1974. Today this one story, red brick structure is filled with 734 sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students, half of the middle grade population in Beauville. The faculty includes 45 teachers, one full-time counselor, the assistant principal, the principal, and several paraprofessionals.

Starting in November 1990, the teachers drew our attention to events they felt showed the community's and East's commitment to providing an environment well-suited to the needs of adolescents. These indicators include: the community's support of the school in passing the millage during difficult economic times, the administration's efforts at East to get student input on developing the school's mission statement, the near unanimous approval of our university/ school partnership that might require more effort on the part of the faculty, and the high student turn-out at school-sponsored events.

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[2]All names are fictitious to preserve the anonymity of persons and schools involved.

The policy decision to become a middle school, however, was not necessarily based on East's perceived commitment to the middle level child. As the research indicates the reasons most typically given for moving to a middle school sequence are to solve district enrollment and facilities problems (Alexander & McEwin, 1986). According to faculty reports at East, when the sixth grade was moved to the middle school several years earlier, the decision was based on "administrative convenience" rather than on a set of fundamental beliefs about the needs of young adolescents when they move from elementary school to junior high. East Middle School is a middle school in grade sequence only. And, until mandated by the state to develop a school-wide mission statement, East seemed to have little sense of an overall direction or sense of purpose. The faculty are departmentalized by discipline, the curriculum is sequenced similarly, and the students are grouped according to their abilities.

In the past, East has tried various innovations resembling the current recommendations for middle school reform, including team teaching and block scheduling. However, these changes did not last. Rather than making changes according to an underlying principle, it seems that reforms were influenced by current administrative demands and did not persist when external forces presented difficulties. Discussions with veteran teachers at East suggested that they had only a vague understanding of the rationale behind past school reforms. Very few of the teachers who were teaching at the time of these reform efforts could explain why changes did not persist:

> I think there were things I am not aware of behind them. One of the things on the positive side for them was that they thought a student coming from elementary having been with one teacher throughout the day would make an easier adjustment if they didn't have to deal with as many different personalities during the day. It was safer, more familiar for the student. So they did have the student at heart when they did that on one level. On another level, I think that it made things easier to schedule. Now the more we offer, the more thorny we make scheduling process.

> My understanding as to why they changed and this may or may not be accurate--basically logistical. They needed to have a means by which they could have some supervision in the lunchroom....To get some teacher freed up, this "supervised study" was created. How much that led to the demolishing of the blocking that they use to do, I'm really not sure.

When we arrived at East Middle School, we also found that many school-wide policies and practices created a learning environment focused on relative ability. The school was tracked into four ability groups (basic, general, advanced, and gifted) with additional sorting by pull-out

programs for compensatory education and special education. Recognition and evaluation based on comparative ability appeared in several forms. At the entrance to East Middle School, hanging opposite the front door are approximately twenty, five by seven inch photographs elaborately displayed in a glass case that show the current "A" honor roll members. This emphasis on the A students extends beyond display cases. Bumper stickers sold by the PTSO read, "I Have an Honor Roll Student at East Middle School." Only honor roll students are allowed to raise and lower the flag each day, and special funds are used to send them to "leadership camp." Perhaps the most salient documentation of East's history as a school that focuses on the importance of relative ability is found in scrapbooks dating back to the late 1960's. These books revealed a host of articles in the town weekly focusing mostly on naming honor roll members and the "Perfect A" students.

Early meetings with the coalition team also revealed a wide range of issues and practices that reflected the goal orientation of the school. These meetings fluctuated back and forth between discussing what teachers could do to help "at-risk kids" and how the psychological climate of the school could be changed to support "all kids." In one particular coalition meeting, members generated a list of how East teachers could boost "self-esteem." Initial emphasis was placed on what the school and individual teachers could do to get kids to "feel better" about themselves. Discussion reflected a desire by the coalition to find ways to recognize all kids, even the underachievers, through expanding the opportunities to recognize students. Teachers seized the opportunity to argue for increasing efforts to "pat kids on the back." Their list included: birthday recognition, complementing kids, recognizing athletic achievement, honor roll, providing late buses to allow school-wide participation in extra-curricular activities, and an "outstanding student of the month" award.

As the list suggests, many teachers believed in coming up with reinforcement programs to improve self-image. As we noted, however, many of these suggested programs would be separate from the day-to-day events at East Middle School. They seemed to surface from the leadership team's focus on helping "at-risk" students. As teachers continued to generate discussion, many of their suggestions could be interpreted as tactics initiated to make up for those students who did not get recognized for their academic ability.

Some suggestions, however, refocused the group on the importance of changing the school environment to foster investment in learning. One of the teachers in the leadership team suggested that "boosting self-esteem" also meant creating an environment that encourages risk-taking. These sorts of remarks indicated early on the teachers were beginning to think about

changing the school environment for all students rather than creating special programs or recognition practices that compensated for students who they perceived as at-risk for academic failure.

II. Explicit Discussions of the Theoretical Framework

From the beginning, we believed it was important to communicate the theoretical basis for this change project. When presenting our plan to the whole staff at our initial recruitment meeting, we discussed the theory in its broadest form and provided copies of the grant proposal, which outlined the theory in detail. In an effort to be truly collaborative, however, we kept direct instruction to a minimum and only explicitly discussed the theory on seven different occasions. Instead, we drew on the issues and goals set forth by the coalition to discuss our framework. We invited East Middle School to bring their concerns to the table, creating an open forum for defining issues, sharing resources, devising plans, and testing out "theories." Bringing years of practice, different experiences, and their own pre-existing frameworks to this process, all the teachers eventually agreed to focus on creating an environment that would increase the likelihood that students would become more invested in learning.

In interviewing the original coalition members in September and October of 1991, we asked them to reflect on their understanding of goal theory. During the interview, we asked the following questions: "From the beginning we have said that this is a theory-based approach to improving middle schools. Are you comfortable with your understanding of this overarching theory? Do you disagree with it in anyway?" In the instances when the teachers hesitated, we prompted them to discuss "what you think the theoretical framework is about."

The members made reference to the target group (at-risk adolescents) and/or to the specific organizational or instructional changes that the administration had begun implementing, like scheduling teachers and students into teams or small houses, introducing cooperative learning into all classrooms, and finding "new" ways to deliver instruction. Because it seemed there were consistently several issues on the table for discussion, the theoretical framework was lost in the process and teachers focused on the more concrete practices that were being changed. Other members generally indicated a shared goal that "all students be invested in school." In these instances, the teachers had difficulty finding the words to articulate how goal theory could guide efforts to create a school culture that is focused on students' investment in learning. Moving the school environment away from a focus on relative ability and towards a task focus was not articulated by any of the original coalition members.

The hostility teachers have historically demonstrated towards research and university collaborations also surfaced when we invited them to think about this goal-theory framework. Most of the responses we received throughout the first six months reflected an ambivalence to theoretical discussions, a desire to move beyond such discussion to more concrete topics, or a misconception of what a guiding theory might suggest. In most instances, teachers introduced their own frameworks for guiding change in middle schools, adapting information to these frameworks as we raised questions and shared information during the weekly meetings. During the interviewing process, reference to the term "theory" carried a certain connotation that the teachers and administrators resisted. The vice principal displayed this resistance most often, implicitly undermining reference to the research-based theoretical framework, yet at the same time acknowledging the importance that teachers be able to develop a guiding "theory" to support change.

> I don't know if I was so much concerned about trying to incorporate each of the theories that you might want to see attempted as to let teachers come up with issues and then come up with some theory to resolve it.

It seems opening a discussion with reference to "theory" brought smirks as well as avoidance. A few teachers challenged the University members to provide explicit strategies for changing classroom practice that would reflect the theory. This type of response surfaced most often among members of math departments, as they resisted the idea of teaching mixed ability students.

> I'm not comfortable with any kind of theory because you have to put it to practical use. The key is taking a theory and putting it to practical use in the classroom.

Other teachers resisted discussion of theory, but for different reasons. Openly accepting the need to move students away from a focus on relative performance, one teacher understood the implications for school reform that is guided by theory but was anxious to move beyond the theory to "trying things out."

> I feel comfortable to say that theory bases make me antsy because I want to get beyond the theory and start testing things and proving things, disproving things and working at it. I think the theory is guiding our changes, but the theory gets lost every once in a while.

Faced with the reluctance or inability of the coalition members to articulate the explicit framework, we found ourselves inviting teachers to reflect on the general principles they felt were guiding the proposed changes. It was on these occasions that we saw how broadly the teachers on the coalition team were focused. Even our most informed coalition members defined framework in their own terms. While these reflections don't conflict with goal theory, they represent very different perspectives. In the first response, the teacher suggests a very specific principle for changing how teachers teach. In the second remark, we find a more general principle that lacks any explicitness on how students could be challenged.

> What do I interpret as UM's idea of how to change that? Understand that content is not what we're really teaching. That thinking skills and problem solving are what we're really teaching. Or ought to be teaching. And that by varying the methods that we use to have an opportunity to reach a greater population. So vary the methods that you use. Think about how what you do meet the needs of students who aren't succeeding.
>
> I'm not so frozen or focused yet that I want to say, these are the specific theories that we're looking for, but we want to promote growth in those areas, we want to challenge the students.

A more detailed analysis of our data suggests that three board frameworks emerged that adequately represent the various visions or guiding principles that competed with goal theory, yet addressed our shared desire to get students more invested in school. These various frameworks, "visions", or "theories" that emerged to guide the teachers' discussions, actions, and reflections include: (a) a child-centered framework emphasized in the literature on middle school reform that addresses social/emotional growth, arguing that teaching and learning should be focused on the whole child rather than on simply conveying subject matter; (b) a deficit framework firmly roots any problems in acheivement with the child and in the home; and (c) the "Effective Schools" framework that focuses on the "correlates" of Effective schools (Edmonds, 1984) and which is reflected in the school-wide mission statement at East.

III. Framework (a) Social-emotional Transition of Young Adolescents

As part of our university/school collaboration, we took responsibility for exposing the coalition team to new programs, models, and innovations that were being tested locally and nationally. We presented information on middle school philosophy through literature, school visits, and in services. During these meetings, the work in middle schools research that focuses on the social/emotional needs of middle level students emerged as a salient framework guiding many discussions, efforts, and reflections. In particular, the literature and model programs that focused on the social/emotional experience of adolescents moving to a more fragmented secondary environment led to specific recommendations. For example, coalition members talked about the need to restructure the school day to create smaller reference groups, team students and teachers into instructional blocks of time, and explore ways to provide consistent adult guidance for every child in the school. Guided by this "belief," many of the teachers on the leadership team described their guiding philosophy as one that focused on the "whole child:"

> I think it would make the whole middle school career much happier. I think it would really give them opportunities to grow, and to explore their behaviors and their learning styles and their relationships with adults and other children. They are going to be regimented enough when they get to high school. They have regimentation to a degree. They move through the day in blocks; that's kind of regimented. The coldness and the lack of follow-through, they don't need to experience that. This is a good time to feel special and feel like you belong and somebody's really going to monitor you, look at your papers, look at you and talk with you and follow-up with you, make suggestions, give you an opportunity to learn different ways to learn.

Focusing on the "affective" area, teachers argued for creating a climate where teachers "care" more. The following remarks represent this particular framework:

> By just making yourself more aware and trying to give that kid the extra boost--you have a great shirt on or boy, you did a nice job here and I'm really glad to see you came today to the kid who doesn't come very regularly. Just those little things.

> Kids really notice when you spend time with them and they notice that it means that you care about them. And the more time you can spend with them, the more opportunities you have to work on their self esteem.

The teachers involved in the coalition efforts also communicated a real pride in their "child-centered" approach to teaching and from the beginning seemed to be enthusiastic about sharing what they are doing with their students. Often these teachers would find moments to share that they liked students and want to be liked in return. As one teacher described at length:

> Last weekend I wrote 11 notes to students and one boy thanked me four times for the note and two of the others were kind of shy and what I have noticed since they have received the notes is they see me in the hall, but get this big grin on their face as soon as they see me. They are coming up and saying, "hi, Miss Murphy" at the beginning of the day and "bye" at the end of class. It's just as a result of the note, and I get a little hassle from (the principal) because I ran off all these (East) Tiger notes--ten different pictures of tigers and I made them all about the same size and put them on colored paper and bought colored envelopes and it's neat.

Experiencing a degree of popularity with the sixth graders, Mr. Dallas, the vice principal, seemed to share this sentiment and made the effort to hand deliver birthday cards to every sixth grader in the school on his or her particular birthday.

In spite of an emphasis on the "whole child," comments tended to ignore the cognitive aspects of early adolescent development and focus on dealing with the behavior.

> If that child is still having problems, we will try to figure out what is causing them and what we can do to alleviate some of the problems, whether it's a reduction in work or nudging to get assignments done, or if behavior...So it's nice to have another classroom teacher before we need call in a principal or therapist or a counselor--a kind of grassroots, front trench type of thing.
>
> If we can avoid that and take care of business right here at home, maybe we can set the tone so that child knows that a problem can be resolved and that he has the capacity of doing that with the teacher, with the other children, right here. It doesn't have to become a major issue.

These teachers continually emphasized the need to deal with the social and emotional issues of adolescent development right in the classroom. While the vice principal and a few of the special education teachers emphasized the need to increase the number of counselors to cope with crisis situations, these teachers encouraged finding ways to cope with behavioral problems by changing the focus of middle grade education so that teachers would focus on every aspect of the child's social and emotional well being..

III. Framework (b) Fix the At-Risk Students Rather Than The School

In our meetings with the coalition, we also discovered that many believed that the problems East Middle School faced were firmly rooted in the adolescent. Asking the faculty at East Middle School to examine the institutional policies and practices that create a culture focused on comparative performance and relative ability, we found many of the coalition members held very strong beliefs about teaching and schooling that are deeply rooted in society. In one of our interviews, one teacher categorically denied any chance that schools could move students away from a focus on relative ability:

> Students will compare themselves to each other forever. They start doing it when they are babies. And they compete against each other when they are babies. It's just a natural thing that comes up. I don't think we can get away from competing. It makes a better person.

Supporting the current culture of the school and resisting change in general, a few teachers often argued that responsibility for failure is located in the individual and problems with these students have little to do with school policies towards instruction, grouping, evaluation, and recognition.

> I think students should be invested, but I don't think they are invested. There are some very good students and they are very interested in learning, and very interested in helping, but we also have a large group of students who come to school and say, "give me my work, let me do it and let me get out of here." They don't care what they're doing, they don't take any interest in what they're doing.

A belief that the problems students face in school are reflective of the child and/or his family life seemed to be adequate reason for a few teachers to vehemently resist heterogeneous grouping, integrated curricula, and alternatives to evaluation that would de-emphasize social comparison and a focus on relative ability.

> Teachers don't like being heterogeneously grouped because they have basic kids who can't add and subtract and they're along with students who are preparing for algebra and it's a real struggle trying to teach all the different ability groups.

Solutions to the "mismatch " (Cuban & Tyack, 1989) between East Middle School and their underachieving students included developing separate programs for at risk-students, providing a "differentiated curriculum" and increasing the emphasis on standardized procedures such as homework policies, paper formats, classroom expectations, and hallway behavior. These suggestions do not call into question institutional practices but rather reinforce stereotypes focused on the abilities and behaviors of children coming from disadvantaged backgrounds (Sheperd, 1991; Cuban & Tyack, 1989). Put simply, several teachers firmly believed that a child's achievement-related behavior is determined by heredity and home environment. Ideas about the interactive nature between the learning environment and students' cognitive development were not consonant with this "deficit framework." As suggested in the following comment on differential math ability, some teachers focused on the "deficits" in underachieving students and did not go beyond that to consider how these deficits might be addressed:

> The other students you have to teach how to think the basic set ups of the problem. We have basic story problems and the students can't figure out what to do with them. They'll guess. They'll look at a story problem and they'll take the numbers there and they'll add or subtract, multiply or divide the numbers and they don't know what they are doing. They're not thinking. I think part of the thinking process goes back to they can't read.

III. Framework (c) on School Reform and the "Effective Schools"

School reform and the agendas that have been set forth by task forces across the country turn to a wide range of research to inform their reports. Not surprisingly, the research on Effective Schools translated by William Bennett during his term as Secretary of Education has been actively incorporated into several state policy recommendations (California State Department of Education, 1987; Purkey & Smith, 1985). In a series of comparative studies, Ron Edmonds (1984) and his colleagues defined several correlates of effective schools that suggest that disadvantaged children at-risk for school failure can experience success in schools that share these correlates. These correlates include: 1) safe and orderly environment; 2) climate of high expectations for success; 3) instructional leadership; 4) clear and focused mission; 5) opportunity to learn and student time on task; 6) frequent monitoring of student progress; 7) home-school relations.

Recent criticism of the Effective Schools movement suggests that very little attention is given to how these correlates can be implemented in the middle grade schools. Moreover, the approach was developed at the elementary level and has not been tested at the middle school level. In spite of its "conceptual and methodological shortcomings (e.g. Stedman, 1987; Entwisle, 1990), the Effective Schools movement has a positive, "can do" message that appeals to policy makers examining school reform.

In beginning our work with East Middle School, we found the Effective School literature had clearly influenced the East's agenda for school improvement. Their mission statement and a series of goals reflecting the Effective Schools' correlates were duplicated and distributed throughout the school. Today, the mission statement is prominently displayed along the hallways of East Middle School and reads as follows: "Everyone at (East) Middle School will provide a safe and challenging environment for students so they may experience academic, emotional, physical, and social growth for their future as responsible citizens."

The first goal and correlate of the mission statement is focused on a safe and orderly environment. An emphasis on `good behavior,' `not put downs,' control in the hallways and on-task behavior is evident constantly in the discussions and actions of East's faculty. In general, teachers follow standard procedures that communicate this effort to provide an orderly environment. For example, when passes are given, teachers usually write down the time of departure so that the receiving teacher can monitor how long a student was in the hallway. Sixth grade teachers now walk their students to and from the lunch room.

More interesting than these practices are the teachers' responses when outsiders are present. Two teachers indicated to us that they were embarrassed by their students' behavior. One teacher continually apologizes for them. Another admits that her pride is at stake and she is reticent to have a visitor without eliciting their help. During meetings of the coalition as well as at PTSO meetings, this concern for behavior has become an unplanned issue for discussion. References are made suggesting that "respect," "hallway behavior," and "homework responsibilities" be made a school-wide policy. Mr. Dallas, as assistant principal, suggests very explicit changes focusing primarily on how a shared "vision" serves in maintaining discipline and insuring time on task:

> Things such as all the kids walking on the right side of the hall, so you don't have kids walking into each other, and then having problems with dropping your books.
>
> If you bring them in a controlled atmosphere and then continue, I think you increase the chance of learning during the hour.

Although Mr. Dallas in his comments did not want to "trivialize" his vision of the school with an over-emphasis on hall behavior, his examples reflect what he believes are critical issues for school reform. Having the "faculty totally behind a specific goal," which leads to maintaining a safe and orderly environment, remains central in his reflections. As discussions from our meetings indicate, lunch room supervision, classroom behavior, detention, supervised study, and the scheduling of classes are particularly crucial to encouraging a "safe and orderly" environment.

The mission statement and the effective school correlates focus on school-wide policies and procedures yet are not consonant with the coalition's efforts to create a school culture that is focused on "getting kids invested in learning" or moving towards a more task-focused environment. While we applaud our colleagues' efforts to develop a shared vision for which the entire school could feel committed, the mission statement and the goals set forth in the plan proved to be difficult to define, and at times competed with our efforts to engage the coalition in a critical examination of the "psychological climate" of East Middle School.

IV. Moving Towards a Stress on Learning for its Own Sake

While arguments against moving the school away from a focus on relative ability emerged often, we did find evidence of an implicit understanding and support for moving toward a task-focused environment. Within the original coalition team, we found several teachers who spend

each day trying to focus students on problem solving, task mastery, and learning for its own sake. In a sense they "live" the theory. Because these teachers already demonstrated a tendency to give students more autonomy and choice, to encourage risk taking and learning for its own sake, and to promote the use of deep level learning strategies, these teachers also seemed more willing to translate their classroom ideas into school-wide policies that would move the school away from a focus on relative ability. Those teachers in particular were excited about how the school evaluates and recognizes students. In the 1991-92 School Improvement Plan, submitted to the district in September, one of the priority goals listed in the plan reads: "To research alternative student evaluation (grading) methods." The following comments revealed that coalition members saw that evaluation could be used to create a climate of social comparison and emphasis on performance:

> I think the pressure of achieving a certain grade that can only be used to compare them with other people is detrimental. I don't know how we are going to convince the parents that we are still educating their kids if we don't give them grades. Though my grade book is filled, I could just as easily pitch the whole thing.

> A lot of kids by the time they get to this age, if they just see E after E after E, it's like "I'm wasting my time." There is no motivation for them to try again because they are going to get that slap in the face called an E again.

During meetings focused on another priority goal listed in the 1991-1992 school improvement plan, "To explore the re-organization of our school day," teachers argued cogently from their own experience for detracking the school.

> I am totally frustrated by what I see happening to the lower ability students when they're just all put together and told to fly on their own. There is just nothing there for them to model after other than a teacher which has very little to do with them.

> So I've had learning center students, or special ed students that have added such depth and dimension to the class, were admired and respected by their classmates for what they contributed, and under other circumstances they wouldn't even bother to make that effort, because they aren't stimulated by their peers in the same way when you have tracking.

> When I taught a G-2 class, Gifted class, there is so much resentment and hatred towards being in that program by so many of the kids because they didn't want to be singled out and they were very expressive about it. When I taught mentally retarded kids, there was a lot of anxiety and concern because they were singled out and teased about it. And if it's true at those two extremes, it's probably just as true along

> the entire continuum. They don't want to be singled out, they don't want to be labeled, don't want to be different than anyone else, especially at this age. If you start labeling a kid and telling them that you're dumb, he's gonna believe it. It's so easy for them to believe that and to sit back and say, "well, I'm dumb, I can't do it." On the other hand, it's real easy for some kids who find things easy, to say, "well why should I push myself at all if everything is real easy?"

These same teachers who used task-focused strategies in their own classrooms proved to be crucial figures in discussions about changing school-wide policies. The following comments made in conversation and during interviews represent their understanding of the need to create a task-focused environment. While discussing school policies focused on evaluation, they raised questions concerning the effects public evaluation based on relative performance can have on the culture of the school:

> Honor rolls fit right into grading. And it doesn't do much for me. You drive around nowadays and you see a million bumper stickers that say, "I have an honor roll student at such and such a school." If that makes parents and kids happy fine. But it doesn't do anything for me. I know that the student that I had last year who had straight E's for two marking periods and then brought his grades up to C's was not going to be on the honor roll, but I think he did a lot more work than most of those kids do. To me it's not the best way to recognize.

As this comment suggests, teachers began to question what messages schools communicate by the heightened emphasis on making "A's." In describing the pressure to evaluate on the basis of relative ability, another teacher suggests, "Teachers feel obligated to master and single out a few kids and make them superior to their peers." Another worries about the deleterious effects of comparative recognition practices and suggests that there must be alternative options.

> We really need to acknowledge people on a variety of levels. There has got to be some kind of a way that we can teach mutual respect and that if you are good in one thing, use your strength to help other people that are weak in that area. I would just like to see people being excited about other people's strengths without feeling bad about themselves. That's really hard at this age. If they see somebody else they might admire them, but instead of admiring them and being happy for what they have, it's like, "I don't have that," so they use it to beat themselves over the head. I think people are prone to depression and it's not a chemical factor, it's one of those things where they compare themselves and if they aren't everything all the people around them are, then they are not good. If there is some sort of way to teach a healthy approach to yourself.

Finally, these same teachers also have specific recommendations to offer:

> I guess what I'd like to see is that we tell all kids what they're good at instead of telling some they aren't any good...A lot of kids give up real fast because if you have to give grades it feels like you have a set of certain standard for failure and there are always some kids that fall below that.

This idea reflects a strong belief that grades can lead to students giving up. Alternatives would encourage recognizing and evaluating all students for their strengths and efforts. Other school-wide policies would ensure a stimulating, instructional environment for all students and not just those deemed able. One teacher discusses how "slower" students have more positive educational experiences in mixed ability classes:

> In a general class, I think that the class has to be structured in such a way that you don't have the same few people answering all the time--the gifted or the advanced or whatever--and so even the gifted students are called upon to play a role and to know their part and I think it's so much more advantageous for all of them. I know I've seen the slower students or learning center students, students with difficulties in one area of their education, they will pick things up and be stimulated by their classmates. Where in a basic class they might not be and I just think it's advantageous for everybody.

Several other teachers on the coalition discussed how teaming provided opportunities for students to spend more time engaged in particular tasks or projects. They found opportunities for students to spend more time engaged in particular tasks or projects because recent school policies encouraging teaching in teams allowed for this flexibility:

> One thing that has helped is that we've been so busy getting ready for camp with our fund raiser, that I can just say to [my team partner], "I need 10 more minutes." And he says, "so do I." We don't have to ask anybody or get the school to change their schedule, he and I just do it. Tomorrow we're building salt and flour and water land forms and they want us to go down and vote during that hour, so (my team partner) and I traded hours. We don't have to ask anybody about that either.

School-wide policies that allow teachers to use their time and energy more flexibly encourage teacher creativity and problem solving while inadvertently enhancing the likelihood that students will benefit from this support.

V. Enabling Mechanisms

Our discussion of middle school reform movements and our visits to model middle schools also led to an emphasis on "enabling mechanisms" at East Middle School. Enabling mechanisms are

structures that allow teachers to change their approaches to teaching and learning, but do not guarantee what will happen. As we noted earlier, the teachers and administrators demonstrated a willingness to explore middle school reform issues. Those recommendations put forth by the Carnegie Council (1989) that were most salient to our weekly meetings included: 1) dividing the middle school into smaller communities, 2) forming teachers and students into teams and assigning an adult advisor to each student, 3) scheduling classes and using time flexibly to maximize opportunities for learning and, 4) exploring new opportunities to meet the needs of all students.

Competing with our efforts to integrate a research-based theoretical framework to changing middle schools, however, was the inordinate amount of time spent discussing enabling mechanisms like team teaching, small house, and block scheduling. Discussions of what those mechanisms could enable were initiated only when the university team asked the teachers to reflect on why they might want to make the proposed changes and how these changes would affect the students in their school.

As discussions of mechanisms that would enable change continued to surface, it became increasingly clear that our colleagues at East approached school change in surface ways. In most instances, teachers were focused on the technicalities of day-to-day practice. As Rogers and Polkinghorn (1990, p. 3) describe, the "technocratic mind set" succinctly characterizes the attitudes, meanings, and beliefs of the teachers at East Middle School. Characterized by teacher-centered instruction that promotes efficiency and order, and that is driven by high stakes tests, text book publishers, and other curriculum objectives set down by administrative directives, this technocratic mind set provides a useful metaphor for understanding many factors that the members of East's coalition face when they endeavor to change the culture of their school. Faced with a demand for procedure and efficiency, our discussions of learning and teaching were undermined.

As we described in detail in another paper (Urdan, Beck, & Midgley, 1992), the rigid use of time, inconsistent leadership and resource allocation, and district mandated objectives impede school reform at East Middle School. Moreover, the regulatory procedures established both by the teachers' union and the district; fear of negative parent/community reaction; and lack of exposure to alternative ideas also surfaced as impediments to our research model.

VI. Blurring of "Frameworks": One Example

Although reference to a "theoretical framework" brought a range of responses from the coalition members throughout our first year together, it is clear that our interactions were guided by goal theory and thus indirectly influenced the teachers' perceptions. As we examined school-wide policies that could be changed in a way that would influence the psychological environment of the school, we discussed curriculum enhancement, recognition, evaluation, and grouping practices. When these very specific topics were addressed, we were able to relate proposed changes to the guiding theoretical framework.

However, the coalition occasionally argued for crucial changes (reduction and/or elimination of tracking) in a way that did not necessarily reflect an understanding of why such changes should be made, but rather acknowledged that these changes were necessary precursors to replicating the middle school model. In this sense, the coalition process tended to blur the teachers' competing beliefs. The discussions that focused on how we would group students serve as a useful example for understanding this general blurring of frameworks.

In a recent review of "detracking schools," Oakes (1992) stresses that the early lesson to be learned from those schools moving away from ability grouping requires that schools move away from an organizational model that is deeply rooted in the norms of our society and critically examine the fundamental principles of learning and schooling. Questions that challenge teachers to examine not only why tracking disenfranchises students but what it is about the culture of a school that supports the persistence of tracking is paramount to our focus. According to Oakes (p. 450), "Most educators find that they must confront simultaneously the complex and often muddy interactions of many dimensions of schooling: curriculum, teaching practices, responses to children's special needs and assessment." One of the teachers made this point succinctly when she warned the coalition members that moving to heterogeneous classes merely because the school feels pressured to acknowledge that tracking is "politically incorrect" does not take into account the issues we need to examine in conjunction with this move. It seems that "detracking" a school requires a willingness to examine not only how the school is organized but what aspects of a school's curriculum, teaching practices, and evaluation policies support a tracked school (Oakes & Lipton, 1992). In this respect, we agree with Oakes and heed the warning of our collaborators. The theoretical framework we brought to this project requires that we examine not only how schools group students and teachers, but also how they evaluate, recognize, and invite them to

participate in the learning and teaching process. In asking the members of the coalition to examine their school-wide grouping policies, we asked how the psychological environment of a "detracked" school could move us away from an emphasis on relative performance and towards an emphasis on task mastery.

Tracking, however, became the subject of heated debate only after the members of the coalition decided they wanted to explore various middle school models. Creating a task force focused on the reorganization of the school day that would allow for interdisciplinary teaching, flexible use of time, and teaming of students and teachers, the teachers quickly found themselves embroiled in a discussion of ability grouping. Those teachers whose instructional practice reflected a task-focused goal orientation proved to be the strongest and most articulate advocates for detracking. Their discussions of the social and cognitive consequences of tracking on both achievers and non-achievers were particularly influential.

Those teachers who were focused on enhancing the affective realm of the school also argued cogently for detracking. However, for those more focused on the social and emotional needs of early adolescents, tracking was seen as primarily an impediment to creating a small house organization in which the students would benefit from a smaller reference group. In response to our questions regarding the goal-theory framework, one teacher's remarks illustrates how various frameworks both competed and enhanced the projects focus on moving students away from a focus on relative performance and towards a focus on learning:

> I think maybe our hearts and our minds were on different tracks. We knew it would be easier to stay with tracking, but in our hearts we knew that maybe we weren't doing a favor to these kids by losing track of them throughout the day. I guess maybe that's part two theory--we lose track of them, we don't know what's happening in their total day. And maybe it's because we're tracking. And maybe if we eliminated tracking to an extent, we would get to know them better and we could intervene a lot quicker. We wouldn't have to go to mid-year and then realize we needed to call in the heavyweights because we lost track of the kid. So tracking kind of went hand in hand with recognizing needs.

In this instance, tracking is seen as problematic because it supports the segmentation of students across the school day and allows teachers to lose "track" of them. As tracking became critical to our discussion of small house models, three issues were discussed: the consequences of tracking; the implicit messages tracking communicated about what is important at East Middle School; and how to manage heterogeneous classes if small houses are

created. To date, the sixth grade at East Middle School has moved from a three-level tracking system to heterogeneous classes with one separate program for the 18 students enrolled in the gifted and talented program.

From the beginning, we believed it was important to communicate the theoretical basis for school reform. After six months of dialogue that fluctuated around competing "theories" and "enabling mechanisms," we were pleased when the vice principal distributed a memo to the entire staff, that read:

> The coalition will be focusing on our policies, practices and procedures as they currently exist and will attempt to determine the necessary changes, etc., to generate a "psychological climate" at (East) that results in the students' investment in learning.

Since most change efforts require considerable work and do not produce quick, visible results, we were convinced that innovation would be abandoned if no commitment to an underlying principle had been made. The issue of if and how to communicate theory will continue to be of interest to us as it has been to other researchers. There are those advocates that take a more active "teach and preach" approach. However, our model reflects the sentiments of both classroom and school reformers such as James Comer and Carole Ames. In these models, researchers/facilitators work with teachers to achieve common goals assuming that the framework will become evident during the process. In this paper we have focused on how a particular theory is interpreted and used during a school/ university collaborative to change middle grade education.

Conclusion

When middle school reform is approached from a research-based, theoretical framework, how do practitioners respond? According to our analysis of the first year of a three-year collaborative effort, the theoretical framework we brought to the collaboration was initially adapted to the teachers' already existing repertoire of principles for learning and schooling. "Getting kids invested in learning" was accepted as a guiding mission; however, teachers struggled with those aspects (moving away from a school-wide focus on individual ability and performance) that didn't "fit" their already existing beliefs. The deficit model emerged as a competing belief by those who sought to fix the students rather than the school. The vice principal's "vision" of an Effective School counteracted this tendency to blame the child, yet overshadowed the developing principles based on goal theory. Turning to the general

characteristics defined as essential to an effective school, the vice principal failed to establish clearly what was meant by "high expectations" or "a safe and orderly environment." The possibility that a goal theory framework might further the school's development of a mission statement was not connected to the Effective Schools literature.

Although Cuban (1990) and others have stressed the need to examine the "deepest level of schooling," this is a difficult task to undertake. In addition to the continual barrage of administrative constraints placed on the teachers' time to think creatively about change, the viewpoints that did drive teachers' concerns are often so varied that collaborations struggle to maintain a focus. The lack of focus often moved the coalition away from abstract discussions and into issues of management and mechanisms that would enable change. As we attempted to draw on the goal theory to guide discussions of change, the teachers often rejected explicit reference to theoretical discussions. However, as the following teacher's comment suggests, they did become more reflective, and committed to examining the principles that reflect proposed changes:

> I am not so stubborn about change that I wouldn't consider it . Especially if I like the goal. If the goal was to help students feel better about themselves, to help students achieve, then that's worth taking a risk. But let's be honest. If I am going to do that, is that what's really going to happen down the road or am I going to be so caught up with new forms and new techniques that I can't stay on top of it and I come to school a dishrag and I'm not building my kids' self-image cause my own is down on the ground? That's just kinda of where I am with it.

The challenge for continued reform efforts lies in guiding practitioners through a more reflective process. Moving beyond studies that confirm the incidences and consequences of the mismatch between early adolescents and middle grade education, we continue to consider changes that will reduce this mismatch. In our efforts to document how practitioners reflect on and use goal theory, we have learned a great deal about how competing "frameworks" and attention to "enabling mechanisms" can influence attempts to approach school reform from a theoretical perspective.

Our guiding framework expands the work of Ames and her colleagues and invites teachers to consider a constellation of principles that affect the learning climate and their teaching practices. In reflecting on those who have also worked to bring theory to practice, we continue to wonder about the role theory plays in fostering meaningful change. Believing that something as important as school change ought to have a rationale that relates to the nature of

students and learning, a particular theory, like goal theory, may provide that guiding force. A critical component to future research on middle school reform will require a more in-depth look at the changes that actually take hold during the process and how they are in turn interpreted by the schools initiating them. If we are to continue our efforts to meet the needs of early adolescents through teaching and learning, we should be committed to understanding how the purposes of schooling reflect these needs.

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